

Fragments
Short Stories & Brief Moments
by Matt Pierard
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Summer

1/2/06

The children came running in from the field giggling and slightly out of breath. A storm was coming -- you could see the line of thunderheads and curtains of rain bluing the horizon. There were five kids that summer, two of our own and three visiting with my siblings. Our girls Molly and Rose wore knee-length cotton jumpers and sandals; Tim, Callie, and Tran wore short pants and t-shirts with sneakers. There were grass stains and mud on everything, but we parents didn't care. It was summer and it meant that they had been active instead of sitting around the house watching TV and eating ice-cream.

Gerald and I sat on the back porch playing gin rummy with my sister Ann and her husband Jim while my brother Ethan and his girlfriend Kim -- parents of Tran -- cuddled on the glider. The kids climbed up the short set of stairs onto the porch and served themselves cups of water from the cooler near the back door. Tran had caught a grasshopper and put it into an empty mayo jar topped by a lid into which Ethan had punched a few holes.

"Let it go tonight after you have done studying it," said Kim, a chemist. She worked at a laboratory on the same college campus where Ethan taught art. "I like that you have an interest in these things but that guy probably has a family of his own to care for. Piku." Tran was Kim's son by another man, one she willingly left behind in Vietnam.

The girls offered wildflowers and pretty stones, while Tim enthused about climbing the oak tree at the back of our property, the trunk of which grew almost parallel with the ground then shot up nearly fifty feet.

"I got up to, oh, about 15 feet from the top where it starts to get really twiggy and could see for miles around. I could see the rain coming in from the south out there. People were running inside... some of them slipped and fell like in a slapshot movie."

"Slapstick," Ann corrected. "You really shouldn't be up a tree in this

kind of weather, Tim, nor should you children be standing beneath one. Lightning tends to seek out the tallest items on a landscape. Even golfers know to come in from the rain,” she added, nodding at her husband.

“Oh Lord, don't remind me!” he chuckled. A businessman, Jim made most of his deals on golf courses and the like.

“What?” I asked

“I was with a client at Bardsmoor Country Club when it started to sprinkle. I was all for packing it in and heading back for the clubhouse, but he insisted on continuing the game. So I cautiously followed him for awhile, talking about advertising rates and new polymers when the rain started to fall harder and thunder boomed in the near distance. Finally it came to me that I had a wife and two kids to take care of and this really wasn't worth it, so I made my apologies and rode back to the clubhouse.”

“So what happened to the client?” asked Gerald cordially, as if he hadn't heard the story before.

“Old fool was determined to make it to the 9th hole. The caddie wisely sat things out in the golf cart. Carhart took a swing and bam – a bolt of pure light zapped him! Burned his hands, singed his hair but he lived Caddie passed out and Carhart wound up getting up and driving the kid back to the club. Tough old bird.”

“Did you get his business after that?” I asked.

“Surprisingly, yes. He's relentless but not unreasonable.”

Eventually, the rain trudged its way up to the house. People think we're crazy still living out here after what happened five years ago, but we felt that someone should take a stand when it comes to the land that they own. The original house was a beauty, a farm house from the turn of the last century. The fields had once been planted with vegetable crops and a pasture on which a herd of cattle roamed. Our parents

bought the property in 1965 and let the crops go fallow. They raised horses for awhile but lost interest after our dad suffered a stroke in 1980. After he died in 1993, our mother moved into a retirement community and the land legally became ours – we three kids, all of us late-bloomers in the child-rearing field.

Ann was first with Tim, and I soon followed with Molly. Ann and Jim chose to live in the city, as did Ethan & Kim in an apartment near the campus. Gerald's construction business was run primarily from his office within the farm house. 1999 was a memorable year for us, and not because of the impending turn of the century. Rose was born in January, a difficult birth which made my doctor advise us not to get pregnant again, so Gerald braved a vasectomy that March. The spring proceeded uneventfully despite half the country bustling about to prepare for Y2K Armageddon. Gerry came home one evening with a trunk-load of canned goods, including a lot of baby food.

Then summer arrived, hot and humid as ever. The rains came in June and everything botanical became lush with green leaves aplenty. Molly was a handful, four years old and into everything. Gerry's business was breaking even and then some. We were comfortable and I figured that by next spring I would go back to work. And then the hurricane came.

There had been a couple that had formed and merely grazed the Florida coast before heading up through Georgia and the Carolinas into nothingness. Then came Genevieve, which tore through Central Florida like a Mixmaster. By the time it hit our land, it had dropped down to a Category 2, but it was still enough to tear the roof off our house and demolish two and one-half walls. When we returned from our shelter at the nearby elementary school, we found that all of our bedrooms – being situated on the second floor -- had disappeared. Only the wall that had the living room fireplace remained intact.

We decided to rebuild, and the house we chose to erect was completely unlike any other in our unincorporated township. Molly was the first one to call it the Pumpkin, a great silver one. Gerry constructed it himself with plans from a geodesic dome company we found online. It has proved to be a solid structure if not the most conventional-looking.

I had to get used to the curved walls which made furniture placement a little more difficult. The bottom floor is open-plan and we wound up devising faux walls with screens and bookshelves. The back porch is a design Gerry came up with, a bulbous addition which makes the house look even more like something out of a fairytale.

As the rain fell and the wind blew it into the porch, we all headed inside. The kids loved to watch the rain slide down the curved windows and drip into the moat-like drainage ditch beneath the house. It fell for about an hour and when the sun bust through the clouds, it was like a blessing. Our restless progeny rushed out to play in the cool, wet grass and we found ourselves joining them.

Leon

1/15/06

There was some semblance of warmth underneath the portico. The bench was hard but high enough off of the ground to discourage rats. Leon stretched out, beat from a long day of panhandling. He had made enough for a burger and coffee, with enough left over to buy a pocket-sized container of aspirin. Arthritis in his knees was paining him; there was rain coming somewhere down the line.

When was the last time he slept indoors? Christmas? There was usually room for one more on Christmas Eve. Liberal guilt was a good thing when you don't gotta home. In the morning, there had been a hot meal and people sang songs and everybody got something new to wear.

Leon lucked into a gray hooded jacket with deep front pockets, extra storage for what little stuff he had left. A pair of dingy cotton gardening gloves were transferred from his jeans along with a gold-tone pocket knife and his packet of aspirin. In his back jeans pocket, there was a nylon wallet with his Social Security card, a long out-of-date Georgia driver's license, and a couple of photos of his family.

Last he had heard, Esther had re-married and their daughters had scattered to New Jersey and California. He had stopped drinking four years ago but it was too late, way too late. None of them wanted anything to do with him anymore. Tracy had been the last to see him, his baby girl. She was in college, making her way through on a scholarship and hard work. Andrea was married to some businessman in San Diego.

Leon stretched out and pulled his hood down tight. The aspirin dulled the ache in his knees enough to sleep. At first it felt as if something had leapt upon him, like a stray dog. Then he heard the human voice muffled through the fleece hood.

“Get up, nigger! Get up and get out!!”

There was a second blow, this time to his shins. Leon cried out and rolled off the bench, clutching his knees. Another blow hit his back and he thought he heard a scream. He pissed himself from fear. Then one hit the back of his head and there was nothing.

Sensation of lifting, rough and gentle at the same time. Of movement, the sound of voices; the hood pulled back and there were faces, most of them young & white. A Latin girl in particular, her face full of kindness and sadness.

“He's always nice,” said another girl somewhere behind him. “I think his name is Lon or Lonny.”

“Let's get him inside,” said the Latin girl. She had long hair caught up in a braid and a pink chenille robe over a white nightgown.

“Are you sure about that, Miss?” said a man in a security guard's uniform. “An ambulance was called for, as well as the police.”

The girl looked a little angry, thought it down, and finally nodded.

“Yes, you're probably right. But Angie,” she said looking behind Leon, “Bring a pillow and a blanket for now. Thanks.”

Angie returned shortly and Leon was made comfortable on the bench.

“Thank you, Miss,” he told the Latin girl, “I don't know what happened...”

“It's alright. Angie saw the creep and there was another guy with a car. They got away but we know the make and the color. Maroon and something foreign. Rich kids probably. Idle rich with nothing better to do,” she shook her head with disgust.

The ambulance pulled up and two EMS guys jumped out with a stretcher. As they loaded Leon upon it, a police cruiser showed up. The two cops interviewed witnesses and got what they could out of Leon.

“I didn't see nothin', Officer,” he said from the stretcher, his whole body one big ache. “I was sleepin' and they just started hittin' me, like outta nowhere. I ain't done nothing to nobody...”

He was taken to the county hospital ER and treated for multiple contusions. Photos were taken of his legs and torso. He was allowed to take a hot shower and was given clean clothes from a donation box, and a plastic bag for his scant belongings. Leon learned that other homeless people had been similarly attacked by young men with baseball bats. One lady got her nose broken, another older man had a fractured pelvis. He had been pushed down a flight of stairs in front of the library.

The sun was beginning to rise when he left the hospital. A nurse's aide had slipped him a couple of dollars for breakfast and whatnot. He still had the hooded jacket; the doctor said it might have protected his head from a harder blow. The all-over ache was dulled by a better class of drugs, a vial of which lay snuggled in the corner of his left jacket pocket beneath a graying glove. Leon walked towards his home of choice, a mile, two miles. There was a bench waiting, and nice neighbors to see him through.

Survivor

2007

Collins stumbled along the highway still thumbing for a ride that would never come. In his cargo pants, black boots, and olive drab t-shirt, he looked like a soldier on leave when It happened and no one was willing to give him a ride. The few survivors were torn between honoring and fearing the military. Too many lives had been needlessly lost overseas, too many in the homeland.

Eventually, he took refuge under an overpass, up in the crevice closest to the road where he could perch like a cat. There were a lot of cats roaming wild these days, the ones lucky enough to have been outside when it happened, and smart enough to take cover. Collins had been heading late into work in his p.o.s. that morning; the car had broken down enough times in the past for him to think nothing of it failing. The flash he glanced in the rear-view mirror was probably the sun. The only weird thing was that the few other cars on the road in long stretches before and behind him had also stalled at the same time.

Collins took a swig from his canteen and tore into a power bar. The water was from a bottle of course; everyone who had drunk city water that morning had since died and the county reeked of their rotting flesh in the summer heat. Most succumbed in their homes hours after quenching their collective thirst. Most of the survivors were in the rural or older suburban areas surrounding Tampa, people with their own wells drilled deep into the underlying sediment. Families that had lived in Hillsborough County for forty years or more. The others were transplants from the country who hated the taste of Tampa water, which had the tincture of chlorine and other nasty additives. They drank only spring water in plastic jugs or city water filtered through expensive equipment. So the average initial survivor was wealthy or old-school Cracker. No amount of money would save them from the coming food shortages combined with stifling heat and no electricity or communications with the outside world. Thousands more died, mostly children and elderly, and among the physically fit, not a few suicides.

1970

11/9/05

Rosalind walked along the side of the road in a yellow waitress uniform, comfortable shoes, and a man's gray cardigan. She held a sack of groceries against her right breast – three oranges, a bag of rice, a package of chicken wings, a bunch of celery, and a roll of Necco Wafers. It was the beginning of a new decade – the 70's – but it could have still been 1968 to her. That's when Bobby left for Vietnam and she was faced with the task of raising three children on her own.

There was a transistor radio in the sack, a Christmas gift from her kids, and she was plugged into the earpiece & listening to a pop station. Aretha followed Creedence and something new from Dusty Springfield. Several cars passed down the two-lane country road, not a few of the men glancing at Rosalind's good legs. Being on her feet most of the day ensured that she kept her high school figure of ten years before.

The sun was beginning to set as Rosalind reached her mother's house. Mrs Nelson watched the kids after they came home from school. Andrew and Bobby Jr were in 4th and 3rd grade respectively, and Cheryl was in kindergarten. As Rosalind neared the back screen door, she could smell her mother's home-made tomato sauce wafting through.

“Mommy's home, Mommy's home!” Bobby piped up from the porch as Rosalind stepped through the door.

“Hi, Baby,” she said, kissing his head. The short-cropped blond hair smelled clean from a recent bath. Andrew trailed him holding Cheryl by the hand. Rosalind kissed them both, handed the sack with the radio and the earplug she'd just removed to Andrew, and scooped up her daughter as they headed into the kitchen. Ruth Nelson stood at the kitchen counter opening a box of spaghetti corkscrews.

“Mama,” Rosalind said to her mother, “ you didn't have to go to this trouble. I bought some chicken and rice for tonight.”

“No problem at all, daughter. These children practically begged me to make spaghetti when I brought these in from the garden,” she said, nodding towards a basket half-full of fresh tomatoes..

Rosalind set Cheryl down at the kitchen table and put the chicken in her mother's refrigerator to keep it cool.

“Boys...” she said to her sons in a tone that made them look at the floor. “What did I tell you about begging?”

“I'm sorry, Mommy,” Bobby said quietly. Andrew didn't apologize. He was becoming a sullen boy without his father around.

“Really Rosie, it was no bother,” said Ruth, dumping the noodles into a pot of boiling water. “Would you mind making the salad?”

Rosalind sighed and went to the fridge again. She pulled out a head of lettuce, a green pepper, and a couple of carrots.

“Boys, take Cheryl into the den and watch Lucy until dinner...you have done your homework already, correct?”

With Bobby gone, Rosalind ran a tighter ship than she used to; she had asked her mother to allow the kids one hour after school of play, followed by a bath, and then homework. Reruns of *I Love Lucy* were the treat before dinner, followed by some family time – board games, sing-alongs -- and bed.

“Yes, Mommy.” “Yes, Mom.” from Bobby & Andrew. Andrew had stopped calling her 'Mommy' a year ago. He knew he was the man of the house for now, especially since Grandpa Nelson passed away in June. There was Uncle Gordo, but he didn't really count since he came back from the war.

Rosalind's older brother had come back from a two-year tour of duty shell-shocked and melancholy. He spent most of his time in the barn behind their folks' house. The Nelsons owned three horses – two mares and a gelding. Gordon lived in the tack house, which had a partitioned sink & toilet plus a daybed, desk & chair, and several shelves of books he was methodically reading. Whole sets of Dickens, Faulkner, Hemingway, Thoreau, etc. When he wasn't reading, he was taking care of the horses and doing general handyman work around the property and for Rosalind. He lived on disability checks from the Army and was under a psychiatrist's care. He kept a supply of non-perishable food in his room but tended to eat dinner with his family.

The Year 100

3/19/06

"I don't know what it is they expect to get out of this – social legitimacy?"

"They had their chance and then they threw it away. They're free to live among us as long as they know their place; what else do they need?"

"Heterosexual marriage: what a farce!"

Johnny rode his bike swiftly home from school. He lived with his parents and baby sister in a home situated within a wooded lot. The side facing south, coated with solar mirrors, glittered in the midday sun,.

Johnny's biological father James was sitting on the front porch listening to Mozart on their in-house radio. Inside, Johnny's stepfather Aaron prepared the evening meal. His sister Lucinda was napping in her cradle next to James. Johnny stowed his bike in the rack next to both of his parents' and hopped up onto the porch with a quizzical look on his face.

"Dad," he said carefully, "What is hetsex?"

From inside, he heard his step-dad drop a ladle, gasping in shock.

"It is an **abomination**, son," James said sternly. He sat the seven year-old on his knee and asked him, "Where did you hear about this, Johnny?"

"At recess. A couple of kids were talking about the new boy, the one Jenny and Inelle are fostering. They said he was the 'product of hetsex'. His name is Timmy and he seems just like anybody else. What does it mean, Daddy?"

"Well son, basically this boy is normal. It is how he came to *exist* which is unnatural. The term you use is one you ought not to toss around freely, at least not out loud. The correct term is 'aberration'."

"Ab-er-*ay*-shun. Okay, but what does it mean?"

"It means that this boy Timmy was unplanned, unlike you and your sister. You two were -- and are -- *wanted* children. In Timmy's case, he was begotten by two perverse souls in the form of a man and a woman. As old as this world is, sexual relations between the opposite sexes -- heterosexuality -- has been an aberration, an abomination. Oh yes, there are people -- not *our* kind of people -- who believe that this kind of behavior should be allowed, but they are quite in the minority of popular opinion!"

Johnny pondered this new information, eventually shrugging and sliding off of his dad's knee. He looked at little Lucinda with her pink cheeks and the delicate eyelashes laying upon them. James ruffled his hair and shooed him inside.

Johnny entered the kitchen where Aaron was stirring a pot of spaghetti sauce.

"Listen to what your father says, John," he said to the boy, glancing over through aromatic steam. "I want you to be nice to this boy Timmy, okay? That is what Jesus would have done. And don't use that word in public again, you hear? Now go get washed up; I'll need some help with the salad."

Johnny grinned and went to his room. There was a bathroom to one side where he washed his hands and face. He changed out of his school uniform (khaki trousers and a navy polo shirt) into his at-home duds (denim shorts and a t-shirt) and checked himself out in the bathroom mirror. He was slim and fit with buzz-cut blond hair. His brown eyes came from his mother, Eve, who lived in the city with her wife and daughter. He only saw her once or twice a year, usually around Christmas. Lucinda's mother was a single college student known only

as Lil7, and impregnated by Aaron. She chose not to have any ties with Lucinda.

While Lucinda sucked contentedly on a bottle of warmed milk, the rest of the Duncan family sat down to spaghetti and green salad. Afterward, the adults settled down to watch the evening news while Johnny bathed and diapered his kid sister. After he put her down to bed, he did his homework and watched a cartoon show until his 8 o'clock bedtime.

Aaron and James turned in by ten o'clock. Aaron was a stay-at-home dad while James worked in the city as an accountant. His bosses' secretary was an aberration named Wanda. She had that attitude they all have, perhaps emboldened by the surprise success of the TV show "Will and Grace" which was about a hetero couple, their girl-crazy friend Jack and the one normal person, a lesbian named Karen. Wanda was said to live with her male partner, a hairdresser. James considered this part of their perversion; most of the men in that industry were aberrant; it was said that it was the one time that they could freely touch women in public, if only their hair.

Dollars

6/29/06

I felt a wad of dollars which sat in my pocket.

I walked until I fell down in a field of grass and weeds and slept. I woke eleven hours later and found a ravine to shit in. Salad, crackers, cheese all decayed and sucked free of all nutrients slid to the muddy ground, emptying me. I wiped myself with my bare fingers and they on the wet grass.

There were others but I didn't acknowledge them. Further up the ravine, the trickle turned into a creek and I drank the cold water. I wore boots, jeans, a flannel shirt and denim jacket. The others disappeared as I headed further up the creek.

I came to a two-lane bridge and walked along it under sheltering branches, not a sign of life but a few birds and squirrels. Eventually there were railroad tracks and a few houses beyond that. A woman ran out of one of the houses and beckoned me inside. There were ten others, including three of her children, sitting in the living room and kitchen drinking soda and coffee.

"The city," the woman asked, "Is it really gone?"

"Yes ma'am," I said, slumping down onto a couch with two other men and a teenaged girl. The woman handed me a cup of hot joe and I drank the bitter brew thankfully.

The man beside me wore a suit and tie, the couple beside him were younger & in casual clothes. A middle-aged woman in a nurse's uniform – the pastel kind that signifies an LPN -- sat at the kitchen table with an older woman and man in night-clothes and robes. Three thirtyish men in jeans stood near the lit fireplace whispering. Another young woman sat with three sleeping young children, two boys and a girl.

“Oh Lord, my husband...” she cried, softly.

“He might have got out,” I said, trying to comfort her. “I did, and so did some other folks.

The day before, I had been sitting in a restaurant on my lunch break when the disturbance began. Great shocks of light threw shadows across the room, followed by shattered window glass. Those not shredded outright ran for the exits, and only those who bothered to look back seemed to die. I made like Lot and headed out of the city with only the clothes on my back, leaving my apartment and material things behind. No one kept me there or caused me to go back, not even my few co-worker friends. I only need glance at fellow runners -- a businesswoman with patches of hair singed to the scalp, a construction worker with a broken arm, a sailor on leave in blood-spattered whites -- to know the extent of the damage behind me.

At one point I scooped up a young girl in school uniform -- she was maybe nine -- and carried her for a couple of miles until I realized that she was limp in my arms. Only when I lay her down beneath a stand of shrubs in the forest did I notice her medalert bracelet embossed with the word 'asthmatic'.

2

The sun rose, sending light creeping up the walls of the kitchen and living area where most of us remained, dozing. I walked tentatively onto the front porch followed by the young woman who had been sitting with the kids. Her name was Sherry Li and she lived in the neighborhood, as did most of the others. Only I and the 'suit', as she called him, were strangers to her.

“Molly Tatum -- she's the nurse -- tends to the Newsomes -- the older couple -- as their home care nurse. She was visiting them when all hell broke loose. The couple on the sofa, Tony Jones and Larinda Scott, share a little house one block over. They go to the community college

on the outskirts of town. Two of the guys by the fireplace, Keith Ramirez and Jon Bajinder, have ... had wives who work in the city. Justin Carter works for the county; he was on vacation this week.”

Our hostess was Karen Livingston, asleep in the master bedroom with her children.

“The Suit, hmmm, his car stalled up the road. Probably because of the bomb. That's what it was, wasn't it? Electromagnetic pulse or something? I remember that from Social Studies.”

“You're very calm,” I said honestly.

“I teach 3rd grade. You have to be, calm I mean. I brought the kids home since I live nearby. My boyfriend works there,” she said, nodding towards the city, “I should be screaming, but I can't. I don't want those kids to see me like that. Dumb ain't it?” she drawled.

“No. Not at all.” Impulsively, I hugged her. She stiffened then slumped and wept for a few moments.

“God,” she said ultimately, pulling away. “I mean like – I'm... my folks are Chinese but I'm thinking of pictures from Hiroshima. Radiated Asian people, the disfigurements --”

“I – I don't think it was nuclear. Else I'd be dead. There was a great ... burning, but it wasn't radioactive. Who knows what the Pentagon's cooked up since 9/11...”

Abducted

6/11/06

Gail walked up the drive with her bag of groceries: a bottle of orange juice, a loaf of bread, a tub of cottage cheese, a bag of carrots, a jar of strawberry preserves, and a couple pouches of tuna. She tripped over a root growing across the pavement and fell, skinning her knee through her slacks. A cone of light enveloped her and she passed out.

She awoke in a room, lying down on a cushioned bed-like platform. The food was lined up, unopened, in a rectangular glass-doored cabinet atop a counter. The walls of the room were white, the room seemed to have a hall leading to a lighted space. No window in the room but there was an unseen vent issuing cool clean air.

Gail was naked except for a white hospital-like gown which reached mid-thigh. The wound on her knee was gone, as was the pink nail polish she had put on her toenails the --- previous night? She was supposed to be a bridesmaid in her girlfriend Melinda's wedding that Sunday. Gail tried to sit up but something held her down.

"Hello?" she cried out, "Is anybody there?"

An aperture in the ceiling opened showing shadows behind opaque glass.

"Up there," she continued, more frightened. "Where am I?"

The invisible bonds tightened for a moment and then disappeared. Gail sat up immediately and swung her legs over. The floor was warm with a padded feel to it. She stood up, a little unsteadily at first because she now realized that the room -- or the structure it sat in -- was moving. All she heard though was the faint whisper of the air vent.

Gail looked at her purchases, which looked like an exhibit in a museum. She walked down the hall towards the light and discovered a sitting room with a ficus tree in a basketweave planter, a fern, and a

pothos vine in front of a sunlit (?) opaque window-wall. There was a mission-style futon with green cushions, and a matching coffee table.

Opposite this open room was counterspace and a black computer monitor sitting on it. A padded office chair sat before it. A sliding door to the side revealed a bathroom. If there was another sliding door which led out of this place, she could not detect it.

"Okay, where am I? Is this some kind of joke?" she said, feeling bolder in the more familiar surroundings. It looked like somebody's ultramodern apartment. She jumped when the light dimmed to half and the monitor flickered on.

"Sit." said a human-like voice.

Gail looked cautiously around before sitting in the chair before the screen. Colorful graphic images began to fill the screen, geometrics and ersatz blobs that seemed to calm Gail down and make her smile.

"How do I --" she began and the images stopped flowing, replaced by a menu with options in a symbolic language which Gail didn't recognize. She squinted at the first one and it opened, revealing three more options. She focused on the middle one and it led to an image of a beach-like scene, except that the water was red and the sand black. There was the unmistakeable sound of waves over unseen speakers and the aroma of seawater, floral notes, and clean air.

Gail, intrigued, squinted on the top option which led to a forest view, one more earth-like. Green everywhere, every shade of it, and every kind of leaf from moss to pine needles. The aroma was pine-y and moist. Reluctantly, she pulled back and out of this travelogue menu to try another option. Something shrieked and there was blackness with icy shards and the smell of blood. Gail pushed back from the monitor.

"Christ, what is this place?!"

She got up and returned to the hall, searching for a door that would lead her out. She succeeded only in finding a closet where the clothes she

had been wearing were hung up neatly, as well as three other outfits which seemed to match her original clothes. Three pairs of khaki slacks, three white short-sleeved blouses: same style and size. In the drawers beside the closet, three sets of underpants and anklet socks. She wore no bra.

"Dress," the voice commanded.

Gail did as she was told, stunned into silence. She found only her original pair of sneakers; perhaps they had no canvas and rubber soles to stitch together she thought to herself. The cone of light surrounded her.

She found herself standing on an arid plain. Before her stood a fabric draped -- something. The fabric was deep red and flapped in a steady breeze. The figure was wide-bodied and stood approximately 20 feet high. At the top, a smooth gold face mask similar to those in Japanese culture tilted towards Gail.

"Who are you? Where am I?" she asked almost robotically. This was a dream. She had passed out, maybe hit her head on something going down, and now she was in the hospital under heavy sedation and hallucinating. She *had* to be.

"You are where we want you to be," the figure said in a deep voice. In the distance there was an explosion, a fireball. The soft whump of sound followed seconds later and Gail was surrounded by soldiers in full battle gear. Desert forces in some Middle Eastern country. They were faceless -- literally -- empty suits of uniforms and gear, goggles and helmets turning to indicate faces.

Gail slapped her hands to her eyes.

"Relax, angel," a woman's voice purred.

Gail uncovered her face to find herself in the earthlike forest from the computer menu. The woman was petite, Asian, in a cream-color silk pajama, her hair in a bun. Gail backed up, her calves hitting a large

stone. She sat on it, feeling cool granite and suedelike lichen & moss upon it.

“What is this place?” Gail breathed out at last.

The woman smiled and held out her hands in a welcoming gesture.

“Home.”

Island Isolation

2006

Taneisha Bradford stood at the window of her mother's house and looked at the ocean waves breaking upon the shore of the mainland. Atlanta was gone, Charleston to the north, and Orlando to the south. Hell, she was never that big a fan of cartoon mice anyway, she said to herself.

Mama had passed the night after she had returned; like Lot's wife, she had dared a look back at the second burning of Atlanta and gotten a faceful of radiation poisoning. Uncle Carl had kept on running, diving into a ravine and crawling deep into a drainage tunnel; sometimes, when fear kicks in, valor takes a backseat. Somehow he got her home so she could see her children and her home again.

Taneisha was sixteen, the oldest of four. Her father was overseas, serving in the National Guard. She had stayed home to take care of the little ones while her mother visited her brother, Carl Tolliver, in a small town outside of the city.

They had been walking home from the grocery store -- Carl's old Buick was forever in the shop -- with bags of fresh corn & tomatoes, beer, & ribs for the party they'd planned to have that night. Friends from high school coming over, old school soul on the box, multicolor Christmas lights strung across the back patio, and absolutely no talk about the damn war.

Nobody talked about the war on the island now. Survival was more on everybody's mind, even though island folk knew a thing or two about hard times. A spit of sand one mile long by a half across, most of which was planted with cotton, Jay Island had existed in virtual isolation since Reconstruction. A dozen families currently worked the fields for a green agribusiness near Macon. The natural cotton was spun into high-end linens popular in Europe; every house on Jay also had them but few chose to live above his means. Money made was put into savings and to college accounts.

There was no crime to speak of on Jay Island. Two men might fight over a woman, but with fists not guns. Everyone attended church and if the general store stocked liquor, it was usually around the 4th and the year's end. Those who tumbled did it quietly indoors and out of sight, not unlike the agribusiness' owners' love lives -- at least when the two men stayed on Jay in their private bungalow.

Taneisha had no man of her own, just Uncle Carl to lean on. Her siblings: Kelvin (14), Kenya (8), and Alicia (5) were a handful, even when her mother was alive. Kelvin had ADD, Kenya the opposite -- withdrawn since her father left for Iraq two years before. Alicia was just into everything: butterflies, boys, jump-rope, what have you.

Taneisha left the front room to stir up a pot of oatmeal on the wood-stove Carl had found in the barn and set up near the kitchen stoop with the help of Kelvin and a neighbor boy. They had built a 3-walled shed around it with a rudimentary screen door at one end. Jay Island had lost most of its electricity the day of the bombings. The general store had a back-up generator for two of the six cold-cases, and those were given over mostly to ice cubes, fragile medicines -- of the island's 103 residents, twelve were diabetic, one had Alzheimer's, and another had 2nd stage lung cancer -- and whatever meat and milk was left.

Kenya knocked quietly on the screen door. She was a pretty girl, with dark skin, hazel eyes, and a close-cropped hairdo. She wore a yellow polo shirt, blue knee-shorts, and blue sneakers -- the island school's uniform for girls. School was still in session and all healthy children were expected to attend.

"Alicia won't get up," she said softly. "I tried pinching her arm, she only turned her head away and asked for Mama."

Taneisha instinctively covered the pot and took it off the stove, bringing it into the kitchen to set it on a tiled counter. She followed her sister upstairs to the child's bedroom. Kelvin was in the bathroom scrubbing himself with a soapy sponge and rationed bottled water; most folks went to the eastern end of the island to bathe in the ocean waves.

No one used the mainland side anymore -- called 'the river' -- none of the adults at any rate.

"Leeshee, honey are you alright?" Taneisha said to her baby sister, kneeling by the bed.

Alicia turned her face to her sister. The child was pale, her hair moist with sweat. There was a smell about her like decay.

"My tummy hurts. And my 'down there'. Like the time we had those green apples and Daddy said we ate too many of them."

Gently, Taneisha lifted the girl up and headed for the bathroom. As she did, Kenya gasped, staring at the bed. There was blood on the sheet and upon Taneisha's hand there was warm moisture from her sister's bottom.

"Oh my Lord Jesus!" Taneisha cried out when she realized what was happening.

"Kelvin, go get Uncle Carl. Now, dammit! Kenya, help me..."

As the frightened boy ran downstairs, shirtless & barefoot, his sisters got the little one undressed. Her underpants were soaked with all manner of blood and bodily waste, some of it dried.

"Leesha baby, tell me what you been doing the last couple of days, can you? Did you go down to the river to play like we used to? Did you get any water into your mouth?"

"Yes, Tannee. Kelvin wouldn't give me the bottle and needed to wash. It stunk bad down there -- all the dead fish - icky -- but I went in anyway. Me and the Simon boys and Lucille..."

"Oh my God!" Taneisha cried softly, trying not to upset her little sisters. "Kenya, go down to Nurse Carruthers' house and bring her here. Don't stop for anything, y'hear?"

"Yes, Taneisha."

The older girl wept into a towel as she heard Kenya run downstairs. She stood Alicia in the tub and began to bathe her with a fresh bottle of water. There was a town pump next to the gas station, an artesian well where everyone drew fresh water. Every couple of days, Carl would take a green plastic wheelbarrow filled with empties into town to replenish the Bradford family supply.

"Tannee?"

"Yes baby?"

"Am I going to see Mama again?"

Taneisha paused for a split-second, fighting back tears, spraying the little girl with lavender-scented bodywash and sponging it off with clean water. A smaller amount of blood trickled down the drain, pinkish water trailing against the white porcelain.

"Yes baby, you will. Someday."

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Kelvin had to clear his throat a second time to get his uncle's attention. Carl Tolliver leaned against a tree kissing a woman Kelvin knew was married to another man. She was plump and colored her hair reddish-blond like a rap singer.

Sue Lee jumped and pushed Carl away as if he were a flirt and not a man she was probably sleeping with on the side.

"Kel Bradford, chile, where's your shoes? School's about to *start* --"

"Uncle Carl!" the boy said ignoring her, "Come home, something's wrong with Alicia! And Kenya pass me by saying she gettin' the nurse."

"Oh God," said Sue, who normally would be working at the cotton gin packing raw materials to go to Macon. "Ebby Simon had Annie Carruthers to her house last night. Both the boys sick with --" the rest she whispered in Carl's ear. In seconds Sue Lee was left alone by the rough bark of the old oak.

Ann Carruthers had been born on Jay Island in 1953, leaving it only for the few years it took to become a registered nurse. She worked for the State of Georgia, assisting --- oftentimes supervising -- young medical students who did a compulsory tour of duty in rural areas as part of their training. Broken bones were mended, minor operations were successful, healthy babies delivered, and at least one discrete pre-Roe abortion performed during her career on the island. She had even volunteered her time in the Gulf Coast after the one-two punch of Katrina & Rita. But this job, this was easily the hardest of her life.

Cut off from the mainland for weeks with few drugs available to treat radiation victims, she could do little but prescribe over-the-counter painkillers and bed-rest with 24 hour care from loved ones. Not surprisingly, the resident who was supposed to arrive two days after the bombings never showed. The other three children who swam in the river were suffering terribly, and now Alicia Bradford to deal with.

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On the 22nd day after the nuclear attacks, a helicopter flew over Jay Island and dropped off supplies. Jugs of cooking oil, bags of rice and dried beans, bricks of yellow cheese, packages of raisins, and several boxes of meds, including treatments for radiation sickness. The latter items were too late for the Simon brothers & Lucille Preston, but Alicia was eased into her death in a deep fog of morphine.

On the 45th day, another transport -- a launch from an ocean liner anchored off the Georgia coast -- delivered a larger pallet of supplies, including a dozen evenly-divided boxes of fresh fruit, honey, coffee, cocoa, tea, dried milk and instant fruit drinks, flour, corn meal, soap, toothpaste, toilet paper and most interestingly solar-powered lights and

other hi-tech gear like solar power generators (which could run electric fans & lights), windup emergency radios, and even an old-fashioned -- but state-of-the-art -- ham radio. Each box also contained an illustrated chapbook & a form letter in stiff prose signed by Mark Ryan, one of the owners of the agribusiness firm which utilized Jay Island cotton.

"Dear People of Jay Island, Georgia:

As you all know, we Americans have suffered an enormous national tragedy. Millions of lives have been needlessly snuffed out by selfish, deluded people intent on forcing their faith-based will upon us. I must point out that we gave as good -- or bad -- as we got and, as of this writing, an international truce has been signed. Journalistic coverage of these events is available in the enclosed volume.

I must also tell you of my personal loss: my partner in business & in life, John Stern, was at a trade-show in the city of Philadelphia when it was attacked. Both of us enjoyed our little vacations on your beautiful island. As part of our gratitude to you all, please enjoy these increasingly rare gifts -- things we all, at one time or another, took for granted in this great country of ours.

Good luck and take care of yourselves. We will be back as soon as humanly possible,.

Mark Ryan Stern."

The chapbook named each of the 14 US cities which were nuked in the hour-long attack, estimated casualties, and perimeters to avoid. It also named the dozen foreign targets, mostly in the Middle East, and their horrific stats. Each city was accompanied by a line drawing of its skyline, emphasizing what was lost in terms of architectural identity. Writers representing the three best known news-sources went into detail about the facts of the event, including human interest stories of heroes and of pockets of untainted communities across the country, although town names were deliberately scratched out, as if to preserve their peace. Small or remote towns in Appalachia & the Rockies,

various US coastal islands, the hardy Amish, and Native American reservations, survived intact. The acting President was the Minority Whip, on vacation in the US Southwest. Postal service will resume shortly. Life goes on in these United States and so on.

Coda

9/30/06

Taneisha buried her sister next to their mother in the family plot of the island cemetery. Generations of interred Bradfords -- her father's people -- went back to the 18th Century. All of their names were tooled into a block of granite that ran along the property. Alas, the local chiseler's book was filled for the next several months as Jay Island's population had decreased to 79 souls. All but two of the diabetics had succumbed, as well as Mr Johnson, dead of black lung, and the four young children early on. An additional nine died of various illnesses which Ann Carruthers neither suggested nor denied were due to radiation exposure.

One constant was Lillian Culver, 91, the lady with Alzheimer's. Her otherwise good health baffled island residents, some calling her a good luck symbol, others (of her generation) that she be a witch. She was famous for nude midnight runs down the main street and loudly criticizing the more tedious sermons of Reverend Simmons. Kenya started to tag along with her on her free times; at first Taneisha and Carl were a little worried but relaxed when Culver's niece Sonya said that she was never violent. "Just really, really loopy."

Kelvin Bradford had recently discovered the solitary pleasures of self-abuse, which Taneisha initially found disgusting -- despite having engaged in a few past explorations of her own. Then her Uncle put it this way; better he do it to himself than to one of the young women left on the island. "This is not a good time for a single girl to be pregnant, would you not agree, dear Niece?" he said theatrically, which made her laugh for the first time in many months.

"But seriously, Uncle, what does the future hold for me? There are

three available boys my age on this island. None of them really, you know, does it for me. Should I wait til the right guy comes along or should I leave the island, even if it means..."

"Death is not necessarily going to happen, Tan. Eventually, the land will cool down, so to speak. Look at Hiroshima, Nagasaki..."

"Which took at least five years to rebuild and repopulate. So you're saying 'stay put'? Become a spinster? Or a nun?"

"Tan, in five years you will be 21. Hardly a spinster. I think you -- all of us -- need to take it one day at a time. Who knows, in less than a year maybe one of your Gruesome Threesome will become a worthy young man in your life. We've all been through a horrible experience -- each and everyone of us has lost a part of us. My sister & your mother, my sweet little niece and your baby sister. You know of course that Samuel Jensen's father was in Atlanta that day, correct? That is a terrible hardship on a young man of 15, 16 -- the responsibilities he now carries. And Roland Broxton, his uncle Luther just wasted away; the man could not deal with the war and simply gave up on life. As to Michael Kemble, welll..."

"Most of us have lost ten-twenty pounds, but he's as fat as ever! Sue Lee told me that he sits at his station spinning cotton with one hand and eating Lord knows what with the other!"

The pair laughed out loud over that one, but it did sort of bother Carl that Taneisha knew Sue. Apparently she was like a mother confessor for some of the island girls; born and raised in Baltimore, even had a bit part in that weird director's fat girl movie. "That's me, there, in the record store!" she would brag about her 2 seconds of screen-time.

Incident

Jazz concert in the park and Betty sat amid a pond of empty, rickety chairs. The band jammed on, oblivious of the bombing that they dismissed as thunder. Betty remained not so much for the music or the comparative safety, but because she had pissed herself in fear. She fully intended to sit until her jeans had dried sufficiently. Shock doesn't make you think rationally.

She sat even after someone told the jazzmen what had happened at the petting zoo on the other side of the park. Betty remained until a cop asked her to move along. Go home ma'am, don't you know what happened? Children and little animals all torn apart together.

Betty rose and walked away, and only then did the cop see the blood spray on the back of her jeans and the child's toy clutched in her hand. Ma'am, stop! Ma'am...

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Betty sat on the examining table in her dotty johnny, clutching Sasha's toy goat while the doctor and nurse tended to the shrapnel wounds on her legs. She stared straight ahead and no one could reach her because she was still standing in the cloud of bloody dust, waiting for it to clear and Sasha come running to her, laughing.

Betty did not respond to Sasha's father, even as he led her out to the car and drove her to her parents' house where the media glare was less rampant. She was 34 years old but you could have sworn she was fourteen when her mother took over. They slept on the sofa together, under a warm stadium blanket, and in the morning, she was able to accept that her baby girl was dead.

Sasha was one of seventeen all told, mostly children, and mostly women -- mothers, nannies, and grandparents. A dozen working men suddenly childless, a few of them wifeless as well.

Betty lay with Alexander in her childhood bed. He had identified the remains of their daughter and made the arrangements for her funeral. The police had interviewed Betty and she had told them that she had only looked away for a second to take a call, and they said that it probably saved her life. Other onlookers of delighted children petting piglets and baby goats had suffered horrible lacerations to their faces. But Betty didn't care about that. She couldn't remember who called her. She only wanted to know who did this terrible thing and why.

Eventually, forensics said it was a nanny, who had heartlessly stowed the bomb beneath a rich couple's baby in his carriage, a boy whose body virtually vanished in one cold moment of terror.

Change

Carol sat on the picnic table toying with her father's pistol. She wore a yellow sweater, blue jeans, and brown loafers. Her light-brown hair was cut summer-short and fluttered in the breeze that blew across the lake.

The slender teenager had taken the gun from her father's dresser drawer. She pointed it at her temple and clicked. Nothing. She pointed it at her abdomen where Ray's child was growing. Click. Nothing. She was sure that she had filled the damn thing like she'd seen her dad do a dozen times before.

"You have to undo the safety lock," a man's voice said suddenly behind her.

Carol tensed for a moment, then swiveled around on the tabletop. He was blond, about thirty, wearing black shades, white chinos, and a madras shirt.

"Put the gun down," he said softly.

Carol was peering at the gun.

"You mean this thi--"

The gun went off, the bullet landing safely behind her in the water. Carol shrieked and dropped the pistol. The man swiftly swept it up, refastened the lock, and shoved it in his belt.

It was an early Saturday morning, June 1961.

"Don't ever do that again. God or Fate or whatever has given you a second chance."

Carol nodded 'yes' then stumbled off into the brush to vomit. As she returned, wiping her mouth on a monogrammed handkerchief, he

noted,

"C. L. -- Cathy?"

"Carol ... Lewis."

He thought about it til it clicked and he chuckled.

"Middle name isn't -- "

"Alice?! Oh lord no! Edna,' she clarified, wrinkling her nose.

"Lotta good ladies have that name."

"Oh, I know, but it's so old-fashioned."

"Could be worse. Imagine fifty years from now, an old granny named Gidget."

Carol laughed.

"That's what I needed to hear," the man said before swiftly cold-cocking her with the butt of the gun.

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When she finally awoke and realized where she was, Carol tried to make herself heard, but to no avail. She lay on her side with her wrists bound behind her, her ankles bound, and a strip of cloth around her mouth. Beneath her was a quilted sleeping bag, and below that, the smooth stretch of highway her captor was driving along.

Carol began to calm down. She was helpless inside the trunk of the car. She could smell its new interior with each inhalation through her nose. He must have been driving for hours. It was warm inside and getting warmer. She tried to sleep despite the ache in her head where he had knocked her out, but gradually she fell off.

It was dim light that greeted Carol when he lifted her out of the trunk. Dim and leafy green. Piny, by the scent of it. She said nothing as he took her into a cabin and deposited her on a double bed in the front room. He pulled out a knife and held it close to her face.

"Do not speak unless I ask you questions. If you scream, no one will hear you. Do you understand?"

Carol nodded and he removed the gag. She breathed freely, sighing with something like relief.

"When I untie you, do not fight me," he continued, in the same precise, even tones as at their first encounter at the lake.

She nodded. He undid her ankles and then her wrists. Slowly she relaxed and lay prone before him.

"Do you need to use the toilet?"

"Yes, please."

He helped her up and led her to a door down a short hall. He flicked on a light. There was an old-fashioned toilet, sink, and shower stall inside. A small window showed only darkness outside.

"You may shower if you please," he said and closed the door.

Shakily at first, Carol went through procedure. When the lukewarm spray hit her face, she welcomed it. The soap was coarse but smelled of lavender. As she washed the sweaty grime from her young body, she felt the slight mound above her pubis. Ray's child inside. How could she have been so stupid? Ray McGowan, the only boy to fail Shop class! Too busy smoking reefer with the colored janitor. He was plenty dumb for a banker's son, but he was such a good kisser... and then it was over. Him buckling his belt in the backseat of his convertible, giggling like an eight year old. She with her panties down on one ankle and her skirt hiked up. She shivered the memory away and stepped out of the stall, dried off, and redressed.

When she cautiously opened the door and headed back into the main room, she found that he had dinner waiting. Tomato soup steamed in mugs of white crockery, and toasted cheese sandwiches waited on the same kind of plates.

"Sit and eat," he said.

She did and it was delicious, despite her situation. There were baked apples for dessert.

"There are books to read until you wish to sleep. Your bed is here --"

He indicated a small room with a twin bed and a bureau with a pitcher of water and a cup atop it just beyond the bathroom. It was windowless and smelled of years of food storage, formerly the pantry she guessed rightly. He locked her inside with a handful of paperbacks.

"There is a chamber pot under the bed," he added through the door, then walked away.

Carol sighed and sat down. The bed creaked and she wept beneath the ceiling fan-light.

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The books were an odd lot. Jane Eyre, a Penny Parker mystery from the 40's, and Thoreau's Walden. She dozed off midway through chapter three of Eyre.

In the morning, she arose to find the door unlocked. She emptied the pot in the toilet, used it again, and flushed it all. The faint smell of bacon resolved itself beneath and inverted crockery bowl -- two strips atop a square of cornbread. There was tea in the pot midtable, still warm beneath a knitted cozy. She poured herself a cup and dug in.

The man had left a handwritten note in neat script, despite the recent-model typewriter on a nearby desk. It read:

'Good morning, Carol

Do not try to leave the cabin and do not snoop. Read or try the radio. I will return by noon. I go by,

Jim.'

Carol shrugged in her idle teenager way. Jim, the sexy blond kidnaper. Well, he was. He had finally taken off his shades to reveal pretty blue eyes, like Paul Newman's, but not as handsome. He was bulkier in build, more muscular.

She washed the dishes at the old fashioned, red metal hand-pump outfitted sink. Determined not to pry she did however take in her surroundings with approval. The front room held the kitchen with its cast-iron stove, rustic cabinets and porcelain sink; the dining table and the typing desk with its wooden swivel chair; a stone fireplace with two old armchairs before it; and Jim's bed and wardrobe cabinet. The floors and walls were of thick pine wood, the ceiling of pressed tin. There were framed prints of flora and fauna of the forest, and the room was cooled by overhead fans with centered light fixtures, larger than the one in the pantry. Built-in bookshelves lined the free spaces along the walls and under the two windows either side of the front door. A modern portable radio sat on the window sill in front of the dining table.

A door off the kitchen led onto a screened-in back porch which ran the length of the house. An old-fashioned tub-style washing machine with wooden wringer rolls sat near the door, and beyond that, a wicker sofa, easy chair, and coffee table. Outside was a Y-shaped clothes-dryer and a small kitchen garden with cabbage, tomatoes, and other vegetables she didn't recognize. Beyond this bit of lawn was a chain-link fence, and beyond that, forested hills all around. It was quiet and peaceful, quite a change from her suburban existence. Even on a Sunday morning such as this there would be the bustle of neighbors getting ready for church. She paused and thought of her father, a Presbyterian deacon, gulping back tears once again.

On the mantelpiece were a small collection of framed sepia-toned photographs of an apparent husband and wife in pre-WWI casual garb. One had them standing proudly before the cabin, he with a long gun and she with garden hoe. In the former portrait, Carol noted the woman's pale eyes and the shape of her nose, which had passed down to her grandson, Jim -- and she bet her name was Edna too.

Carol selected a book more to her liking from the shelf below the window, Doyle's "Sign of Four" and settled down to read in one of the armchairs.

It had started to rain when Jim returned, carrying a crate full of dry goods. He set the box on the table and ran his hand through his brush-cut hair, scattering droplets.

"Put down the book and come here."

She obliged him and he handed her a half-dozen brown paper wrapped parcels tied with twine.

"You will need these. Go to your room and I will have lunch ready in a half-hour."

He didn't lock her in this time. She lay the packages on the bureau and unwrapped them curiously. The first held three boys'-size denim shirts, the second a trio of boy's jeans, the third boys' underwear and socks, and the fourth, actual girl clothes -- a pair of plain white cotton nighties. There was also a blue box of something she wouldn't need until next spring, two bars of pink floral soap, a toothbrush, toothpaste, and a hairbrush. Jim had told the nosy general store keeper that the supplies were for his widowed sister and nephew in case they paid him a visit. Pam was actually happily re-married to a Miami businessman named Saul, with son Joey in military boarding school.

Boldly, Carol held up the boxer shorts at lunch. Jim shrugged.

"I'm sorry, but panties would have been too conspicuous. Besides, women wore things like that at the turn of the century. Step-ins I think

they called them."

"More like culottes," Carol blurted, instantly blushing, but Jim laughed.

"Okay, you can talk when you please," he said, "But not too much."

It was a time when men still had the right to treat women as less than equal, despite all of their advancements to that point. Carol had grown up a single child in a fairly strict Christian atmosphere. There was also Bomb fear, and the Russians, rock & roll, negroes striving for their own equality, and this new presidential candidate out of Boston, a Roman Catholic of all things.

"Why did you bring me here?"

"To save you from suicide," he answered bluntly.

"But," she chose her words carefully, "Isn't this ... illegal?"

"Suicide is illegal," he countered, "And it's a sin."

"But... my father!"

"And your mother?"

"Cancer," Carol stated sadly, hanging her head.

"I'm sorry, but you're also pregnant, correct?"

Startled, Carol looked up.

"How did --"

"Why else would a sixteen year-old girl try to kill herself? Either a boy dumped you or--"

"Both, okay?!"

Tears welled up in her eyes and she looked away. Jim abruptly stood and walked away.

"Eat. You'll feel better."

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Weeks passed and Carol's condition grew more obvious. The boy clothes fit her to a point but the shirts naturally became inadequate. Jim wound up giving her a couple of his.

"Jim, I need maternity dresses. These clothes just aren't working for me," she said woefully, "Can you get me some material and patterns. I know how to sew."

"There's a kit in here," he pulled out a wicker box from his wardrobe drawer. It was a basic model meant for mending small jobs like loose buttons and little tears.

"I'll need more thread than this," she pouted.

The next afternoon, Jim returned with two bolts of the plainest cotton fabric the store had to offer -- blue denim and brown corduroy. Carol wrinkled her nose but accepted the challenge. Again, the patterns were male-centric -- a shirt and a corduroy jacket. The look the storekeeper threw the seemingly macho young man was one of puzzlement and mild disgust. Jim never showed any real interest in the two or three available single girls in town. There had been talk about him and his wealthy family in the past, but wealth had its way of keeping bigots on the back burner.

"None a'my business, long as he ain't no Commie," the old man muttered.

Carol extrapolated and adjusted these designs and within a month had produced two collared jumpers and gifted Jim with a real cord jacket. They weren't perfect -- she'd trained on an electric machine -- but they were adequate for house and yard wear. She was now allowed to walk

freely outside for exercise and to help with the vegetable crops.

"Jim, how do you power the cabin?" she asked one afternoon as he typed and she sat in one armchair with her legs propped up on its twin. She was in her fifth month and her belly was well-developed. It was early November and getting crisp outside; a small blaze in the fireplace warmed her.

"Solar energy," he said, trying to concentrate. Although he came from money and received a monthly stipend, he made a little extra writing science and technological articles for various journals; also pulp sci-fi under a pseudonym.

Carol knew by his tone not to push her luck. He had only blown up at her once and that was enough. She had foolishly asked him a personal question and he shouted she 'mind her own goddamn business!'. This was a new oath to her ears, her father never uttering anything harsher than 'goshdarnit' in front of her. The boys she knew would occasionally mutter 'shit' at some major annoyance, like hornet stings or car dents.

Thanksgiving was unlike any she had known. There was no turkey for one thing. Jim didn't eat meat, though he provided her with canned tuna and chicken 'for the baby'. There was wild rice and mushrooms, pumpkin loaf, roasted corn, cranberry sauce, and apple pudding. Christmas was a variation on this meal; a sapling strung with popcorn, cranberries, and tinfoil-covered cardboard stars brightened the room. Carol had become very crafts-oriented since her abduction. In her later memoir, Stockholm Syndrome would have a chapter of its own.

The baby arrived late in January 1962. He was a healthy eight-pounder. Both Carol and Jim had studied his grandfather's medical books, pointedly the chapters on obstetrics. He had been a respected physician and inventor at the turn of the century whose patents on surgical instruments had made the family fortune. The boy, named David after her father, slept in a towel-lined bureau drawer.

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By May 1962, Carol Lewis case was stone cold. The gun was recovered from the lake, but clean of fingerprints. All Carol had left behind was the discarded handkerchief with her monogram and the bicycle she'd taken to the lake. All of her clothes were still in their drawers and closet; her savings account had not been accessed; there was no sign of foul play at the scene beyond a bit of gunpowder on the picnic table. Most tellingly, there was no ransom note. The only person who knew about the baby was his father, who shamefacedly confessed to his parents a month after Carol's disappearance. The police officially ruled him out as a suspect, wealth once again having its privileges. The point became moot a few years later when Ray McGowan returned home from Vietnam in a flag-draped casket.

David Lewis, however, never gave up hope that he'd see his girl again one day, in this life or another. Hope was bolstered in 1967 with the arrival of a Christmas card and a color Polaroid of a five year-old boy beaming on his long-haired brunette mother's lap. Postmarked San Francisco with no other return address, the card read 'Dear Daddy, this is your grandson, Davy. We're doing fine. We hope you are too. Peace, Love, and Happy New Year. C.'

Storm

Jack lounged on the back porch, waiting for the wash to be done. so he could hang it up. A set of sheets, pillowcase, a couple of t-shirts and drawers, and two pairs of pants whirled around in cold soapy water. Cold was cheaper than hot and cleaned about as well, plus there wasn't much chance of bleeding. None of the pink sheets of his childhood after Dad had casually dropped a red shirt in with the whites. Was it deliberate? Probably, since Jack's homo tendencies were already evident at thirteen. It was alright for Louann and Suzy, his kid sisters -- pink sheets were okay by them -- but rosy-tinted space ships and astronauts? Not cool, Dad.

It was late February in Florida, warm and breezy in one of those brief respites to the state's variable winter climate. Perfect for drying clothes on the line. The past winter months, he'd had to drip-dry clothes in the shower-stall or out on the porch. The small house sat on a couple of acres of land with a view of the superhighway from the front of the house, and of patchy wasteland from the back, the latter dominated by a sprawling old oak tree. Its thick limbs grew out low enough to the ground for his visiting nieces and nephews to climb upon over the years. One time he caught his fifteen year old nephew Patrick smoking weed up in the higher branches, appropriately enough. It had been a dry summer and Jack was more concerned about falling embers starting a brushfire than what they were made of.

Jack lived determinedly alone. No permanent boyfriend, no pets to speak of, though he used to toss scraps out for a stray cat that haunted his place for a few years. Never got near enough for Jack to pet it, a skittish, green-eyed critter that would run up the oak tree and seemingly perch for days, ignoring Jack and scanning its surroundings. Come down just to drink the water Jack left out and eat the scraps. One particularly cold winter it didn't show up and that was that.

The washer went through its final spin and stopped with a click. Jack rose and pulled out the just-damp items, laying them in a pop-up mesh basket and carrying them out to the line. He pinned them up side by

side, then went back to his green resin Adirondack chair to wait out their drying. It was a Sunday and he listened to the replay of Mr. K's show from MN on the college radio station. He had no cable TV, though he did have the internet for his at-home job, writing code and serving as webmaster to a couple of single-page websites. These were old-school sites with frill-free basic info and contacts that would have made another Jack, Webb by name, proud. Jack made enough to live on, pay his taxes, and be able to rent a car (didn't own one, didn't want one) to do monthly shopping and other business.

He would load up on canned goods, fresh produce, a rotisserie chicken, and time-saving instants. His two-room cottage, three with the john, was a classically sparsely-furnished man cave. Recliner, single-sized bed, desk and chair, and shelving units. Bedroom closet for his clothes and other necessities. No HVAC, just double-hung windows and space heaters or fans depending on the season. Needless to say, his bedroom conquests rarely stayed more than a day without complaining. 'There's the door,' he would respond, shrugging manfully. Return engagements was rare as hen's teeth. So be it. In summer he would set up an inflatable pool ostensibly for his younger relatives but really for his own pleasure. He could stretch out his burly bearish body clad only in a brief swimsuit -- only the rushing traffic ruled out full frontal nudity -- and float for hours, listening to his mp3 player or reading old hardbacks. Mysteries, romances, sci-fi, and history.

The warm breeze eventually picked up Jack's sheets and flapped them. Dry enough to take down, the were neatly folded up and placed in the bottom of the mesh bag. The shirts, socks, and underwear were ready several minutes later, and in they went. The khakis soon followed, but the heavy denim jeans took the longest and would have to wait. Jack carried the other laundry inside and stowed it in the closet which had a dresser below shirt level. He could see his blue jeans dance awkwardly in the growing wind. He could hear Mr. K crooning gospel tunes in sweet harmony with his female partner through the open bedroom window.

The wind picked up even more from the west, a gust slamminng the jeans hard enough to loosen one clothespin free from the waist. Jack

hopped out in time to pull it off the line and bring it inside. From past experience, he took the washer's vinyl cover from the kitchen cupboard and smoothed it down, secured with magnets. For in the near distance, a thunderstorm was brewing. It was all slate blue and dark gray above the horizon and the buffeted tree tops. He brought the radio in as well, wincing at static bursts that distorted the cheery music. He shut the windows, concentrated on the show from Minnesota, lit one of his nephew's cigarettes, and settled down in his recliner to wait it out.

Forgiveness

Susan swept the linoleum floor of her suburban tract home. It was early summer and the rugs had just been taken up, rolled up tight in craft paper, and stored in the attic until winter. It was a Florida tradition as far back as Susan could remember. The room felt somewhat cooler beneath her bare feet. Behind her was the sofa and the coffee table, strewn with current magazines. Before her was the hi-fi and record cabinet, the full bookcase, and the vases atop it. They purposefully did not own a television -- books and music, and the occasional radio programs were enough. It was 1957 after all -- TV could wait.

Susan finished her chores and put the sweeper away. She wore an aqua halter house dress, panties, and no bra. It would simply spoil the look. Her breasts were small enough to be so daring, especially with Mitch at the office and the children still young enough not to care. She used the bathroom, finishing with splashes of cooling water on her arms and face. She was 27 with short, reddish-brown hair, dark green eyes, and a healthy figure for the day, which she would maintain for another fifty years. Her skin was fair, less likely to tan than outright burn, and she was taller than average, about 5'8". Mitch was 6'2", tan, and nicely-built, so they looked good together.

Her older son Kyle was five and currently at school, his first year and wasn't he being a brave boy about it? Her younger son, Kevin, was three and taking his nap. She went down the hall to check on him. He lay on his lower bunk bed in briefs and a white t-shirt, fast asleep. The window fan whirled softly, the breeze tousling his feathery chestnut hair gently. A tidy child, he had folded his blue dungarees over the back of the chair to the desk he shared with Kyle.

Susan tiptoed back to the kitchen and began making an afterschool snack for Kyle, hard boiling a couple of eggs for salad sandwiches with dill pickles. The kitchen faced the street so she would see him walking home with the other children from the elementary school. Marcy, Katie, Tony, and Steve were his usual companions. The girls strolled

by first, a blonde and a brunette in knee-length, pastel short-sleeved dresses. They were giggling about someone, perhaps Tony himself, the cute Cuban boy directly behind them. Tony was a little chubby in the way that would turn to muscle by high school, seven years old with a puckish expression on his face from listening to enough stupid girls talking giddily about him within earshot. Usually Kyle was beside him, chatting about the day's events or the cowboy series they both liked on the radio.

He wasn't there.

Steve came into view next, a hundred feet farther behind than usual. He was tall for a six year old, slender with butch cut red hair, in a t-shirt and jeans. He too was alone and in Susan's anxious mind appeared to be upset about something. She dropped what she was doing, stepped into her sandals, and walked quickly up to him.

"Hello Steven, have you seen Kyle? My little boy," she emphasized, "Brown hair, in first grade?"

The boy looked down shyly.

"No ma'am," he said softly, "I--"

"Yes?"

"He was behind me, a little while ago. There was a ... puppy. It looked lost."

Wordlessly, Susan took off, walking rapidly then running down the street. No Kyle dawdling with a stray dog in sight. She remembered Kevin and the front door she had left open. He was okay when she returned so she put away the food and called the school.

"Palmview Elementary," a woman answered tiredly.

"Hello, I'm Susan Edmonds. My son Kyle is a first grader. He should have come home by now--"

"Oh, Mrs. Edmonds, I'm so sorry! Have you alerted the police?"

"Then he's not there?!" Susan was getting emotional.

"Mrs. Edmonds," the woman said calmly. "On Fridays, we tend to lock up and leave early. All of the children are out of school."

"Where is my son, you heartless witch?!"

"Ma'am, there's no need for --"

Susan hung up and dialed the police.

"He's a little boy. Brown hair, green eyes, wearing brown pants, a green shirt, and white sneakers. Yes, Palmview Elementary School!"

They would send someone out to her house and also alert the patrol cars. While she waited, she also called Mitchell, and then her mother, who lived one town over. Mitch was heading home. Her mother offered to come too but Susan said no. Her father had been having memory problems and shouldn't be left alone.

The police arrived and questioned her, then Mitch when he got home. Kevin was up by then and needing attention. Susan fed and comforted him.

"Is this your boy?" a beat officer said suddenly. He held a boy matching Kyle's description in the crook of his arm.

"Kyle!" Mitch cried out, rushing forward. He took his son, who appeared listless and withdrawn, into his arms. The boy clung to him weakly and said nothing.

"Is he... Mitch... has he been drugged?" Susan said, petting her son's hair. "Give him to me, honey."

Mitch transferred the child and repeated Susan's question to the police.

The officer in charge motioned him over for a conversation in the corner of the kitchen. Mitch glanced back at his family then joined the other men, including a couple of detectives in business suits.

"Mr Edmonds, I'm sorry to tell you that your son appears to have been assaulted."

"What?! How... who did this??!"

"A negro vagrant has been arrested. He was found with your son in a ... deviant situation, but we believe we got there just in time before anything actually happened. The drug appears to be alcohol..."

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Ten years passed. Ezekiel Thomas was convicted of child endangerment and sentenced to 20 years-to-life in light of a previous encounter with an underage teen girl. The incident precipitated a period of racial unrest in Palmview. By 1966, Kyle had grown into an athletic young teenager indifferent to civil rights issues and supportive of Vietnam. He fully intended to go when his number came up. He had never told anyone of what really happened in his one and only encounter with Ezekiel Thomas behind a clump of palmetto and some broken crates.

He had left the group of his peers to follow the puppy, which had actually returned to its mother and was not the lure Ezekiel used as the prosecutor had lewdly suggested. Kyle had need to pee and went behind the shrubbery to do so; as he began to zip up his pants, a drunken Thomas appeared. He invited the boy to come 'sit a spell' with him on the back seat from an old car that leaned up against a weed-clotted chainlink fence. Innocently intrigued -- Kyle had never talked to an old colored man before -- he thought that the light-skinned old man looked a lot like his own grandfather, no stranger to drink. Thomas offered him a swig of the liquor, which was sweet with a cherry taste that reminded the boy of Christmas chocolates.

He couldn't remember what the old man said, just him gesticulating a

lot. When Kyle stood to go, a bit wobbly on his little legs, Thomas noticed the boy's opened fly and perhaps remembering doing so with his own son or nephew, attempted to zip it up. It was at this exact moment the beat cop showed up and it snowballed from then on. Kyle had watched in horror as the cop lunged at Thomas and shook him violently, cursing and yelling at him. The cop cuffed the old man finally and swept the boy up in his free arm. He called in the perp at a police box, left him with the arriving officers, and carried the boy home.

Kyle had his own room now. Kevin still slept in the lower bunk of their old room. Kyle could lock the door and peruse girly magazines to release tension, or he would watch on the portable TV reruns of Combat, Gunsmoke, and Dragnet especially. Anything with heroes and villains, guns and violence.

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In the summerized living room with the carpets rolled up tight in the attic, Susan embroidered a pillowcase while a Doris Day album played on the stereo. Mitch sat at the kitchen dinette table in a white t-shirt and black slacks, reading the Saturday papers with a beer and an open can of corn, from each of which he took swigs. He liked to annoy Susan with his subsequent belching; he had always blamed her, in that irrational way some men have, for Kyle's encounter with Ezekial Jonas. It was a real effort to hold a stitch, keep it from snagging when the gas erupted from her husband's throat. She herself occasionally sipped from a bottle of diet orange soda, and her own little lady-like burps were a kind of revenge. Susan never dared let one loose the way Mitch did; it simply wasn't in her nature.

In his room, Kyle perused an old Playboy he'd found in the woods after he and his buddies had raided a hobo encampment. They had torn down the tents and beaten away the homeless men with fists and baseball bats, stealing their few precious possessions as trophies.

Outside, Kevin played with his dog, Mike, a collie-lab mix, in the backyard. Mike, who had originally come from Maine with his elderly

owner, didn't like the Florida heat and would have preferred spending his time inside the recently air-conditioned Edmonds household. His former owner had had to give him up when she moved into an old-age home where Susan volunteered three times a week. Still, the dog obediently chased the ball his young master threw and brought it back in dumb dog happiness.

Presently, Kevin heard music he rarely got to hear at home. A negro family named Carver had moved into the house directly opposite their backyard fence. Susan used that adjective while Mitch used the universally-offensive one; Kyle followed his father's lead, Kevin his mom's. Kevin recognized Diana Ross from the top 40 radio station he kept his transistor radio permanently set on. but try as he might, he was never allowed to have an r'n'b album to play on his portable record-player. Consequently, he had to settle for an ear-plug in his room at night as the radio sat on his nightstand and cold air from the window unit wafted over him and his brushy chestnut hair.

Mr. Carver worked for the military in some capacity, supposedly NASA, though Mitch had a hard time getting his head around that concept. A "nigger with a college degree" making more money than he did? Impossible! Some kind of Commie plot. Susan had been more cordial, actually talking to Mary Carver over the back fence about gardening and the local school system. Susan Edmonds was a Christian woman just like Mrs. Carver so there was an instant bond between them. Their husbands, on the other hand, were men of business (Mitch) and science (Bill) who had little interest in such niceties. Still, the women were lax to invite one or the other over for tea, and their parties were equal but separate for the rest of the decade.

Kevin often hoped Bill Carver would appear in the backyard so he could strike up a conversation with him about the space program, his favorite topic. The boy longed to become an astronaut, despite his physical frailty. He had a heart condition that would keep him grounded for the rest of his life, but his enthusiasm was real. Unfortunately, Mr. Carver rarely entered the backyard. Mary tended her garden, Bill Junior would mow the lawn, and Cindy Carver, 8, would play Barbies on their back porch. In his nascent adolescence,

Kevin was most intrigued by the younger Bill's physique, the youth always shirtless and his sixteen year-old, dark brown body dripping with sweat. He was Kevin's first crush and literally set the tone for his future love life.

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In 1977, Ezekiel Jonas was released from prison so that he could die at home of pancreatic cancer. The long time of incarceration with its attendant beatings for his 'crime', despite his protestations of innocence, left him a truly broken man. When he moved into his daughter's home, the protests were few; in his state, he was not considered a danger to anyone.

Kyle Edmonds lived in Chicago now. He never made it to Vietnam, not having passed the psych eval. He worked for an insurance company and was already divorced with a three year-old daughter and a butt-load of child-support and alimony payments.

Kevin was in Miami with the rest of the boys, selling wine and cheese to restaurants. He was active in the gay community, despite Anita's insanity, and lived with the closest approximation of Bill Carver, Jr he could get.

Susan and Mitch had moved into a Fort Lauderdale condo. His car dealership was top-rated in the county, and Sue was a popular hostess at parties where race was no longer an issue. She had prayed with Mary Carver the day of King's assassination and never looked back.

By 1987, Jonas was long dead and Kevin was dying of AIDS. Kyle had moved down to Miami to help Susan care for him. He never fully accepted his brother's lifestyle -- he blamed the 'bestial' black men his brother favored -- but he loved him and it was a struggle to keep himself together.

In 1997, Mitch Edmonds had died of a cerebral hemorrhage and Susan had moved into an assisted-living facility. Losing her youngest son had been hard enough, but the loss of the love of her life put her into an

emotional tailspin. Kevin, who had taken Christ as his savior after his brother died, ran a local insurance office with his daughter Linda, now 23 and newly-graduated from Florida State. He and her mother, Candy, had each since re-married and were each more or less happier. Kevin's wife Rosita was the daughter of Cuban immigrants and she was pregnant with his second child.

Susan Edmonds died in 2002. Mary Carver eulogized her. Kyle and Rosita Edmonds sat in the front pews with their extended family, which included his daughter Linda and his other daughter, Cindy -- Linda's wife and Mary's daughter -- and their sons, Mario and Kevin. Life's little ironies, where the former liar, bully, and bigot turns out to have inherited and passed on the genes that unintentionally killed his own brother.

Until It Happens To You

Melissa Brown sat on the back porch of her seaside cottage enjoying the cool weather after endless months of summer heat. She wore a pink velour robe over a white t-shirt and seersucker capri pants. She was not dressed for company, as her mother would have said had she been there. Mother was a thousand miles away back in Indiana.

Few snowbirds strolled the beach. They had come down south believing all the guff about slightly humid, sunny days and wearing bikinis as you played in the surf. Dry, cold breezes soon dispelled that PR fantasy. Slightly dazed turistas huddled along in newly-bought hoodies obtained at the local All-Mart as they took in the scenery.

Melissa could hear Ed in the kitchen, rustling up some grub.

"There's some sausage in the fridge," she called back to him through the open sliding screen door without turning her head. She was watching an Indian girl walking slowly by with her toddler daughter. Both were giggling. The mother was plumply pretty, twentyish in a pink and orange sari which she had pinned up just below her knees. The child wore a blue jersey over aquamarine knee-length shorts.

"Damn, Mel, is this all there is?"

Melissa rolled her eyes and groaned. She stood up and stretched, still eyeing the Hindu duo, then went inside.

"The people they rent cottages to these days..." she grumbled, shaking her head.

Ed meandered outside for a lookyloo. The girl was pretty, he noted, and the kid was cute.

"So?" he said upon return.

Melissa hunted in the fridge, brought out tuna salad, an avocado, and a

bowl of tomatoes.

"They're practically black," she said, slicing carefully into the avocado and deftly plucking out its large brown seed.

"More gray, I think, sort of pearly-beige gray."

"Thank you, Sherwin Williams. Here's your lunch -- eat it!"

Melissa flounced out and upstairs.

"I think she's kind of pretty," Ed said softly, slicing into the tomatoes.

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Melissa stripped and showered. She pulled on jeans, blouse and sweater, hopped downstairs as if she were still a Muncie teenager, and slipped on her Keds.

"Be back in an hour," she called over her shoulder to her husband, who sat at the dining booth eating his pick-up lunch with a desultory air.

"Please don't take it out on anybody," he muttered wishfully as he heard her pull out of the carport.

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A mile down the road, past a boat shop, fishing piers, and cafes with nautical names, Melissa pulled into the parking lot of a popular Southern grocery chain store. It was one of the oldest buildings still being used, with its distinctive post-deco signage. It reminded her of her hometown outside of Muncie, which featured a downtown business section virtually unchanged from the 1920's. She yanked a cart out of its queue and entered the chrome-framed glass doors, which slid open aided by an electric eye above them.

Inside, she piled her cart with fresh produce, canned goods, a dozen eggs, milk, coffee, and two loaves of bread. On a whim, she bought a

large bag of jasmine rice, which was hard to get in her midwestern town; by the time spring rolled around, there'd be enough to haul back along with the new seashells she and Ed had collected. Her home living room had a beachy theme to it, including glass lamp bases she had been methodically filling with new shells every spring.

At check-out, in the next aisle over, stood the Indian girl and her tot, the latter sitting in the cart taking in the sights. She too had bought a sack of the same rice, fresh tomatoes, onions, and toddler food in a dozen small glass jars. Melissa glared at her until the child gurgled a stream of foreign syllables. A grandmother herself, Melissa warmed to the babble, no matter how alien to her ears.

The Hindu woman paid her tab and rolled the cart outside. Melissa did likewise a few moments later to catch a glimpse of the younger woman's husband, who put the groceries into the trunk of their black sedan while she buckled their daughter into her special chair. Melissa stowed her buys in the back seat of her SUV and drove back to the cottage, more subdued and an nth ashamed. That the husband had been handsome and more western-looking (for an Indian) than she had expected may have been the reason.

She carried the groceries into the kitchen and began putting them away. Ed had left the house apparently, not answering Melissa's calls up the stairs and or down in the spare bedroom, which had a computer desk upon which he occasionally surfed his laptop, off the living room. She sighed and gave him a ring. His tone for her was the melody of a rock song of he same name. She now heard it faintly off the back porch. Melissa barged out the screen door, saying, "Ed Finley, did you -not- hear me call?"

She saw the backs of his big bare feet first. He lay facedown in the sand between clumps of beach grass. The phone was near his face, which was tilted on the left side. Tiny grains of sand jumped up regularly from his lips. He was still breathing.

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EMS workers carefully loaded the 6'3" man into their ambulance, which sped up the main drag to the nearest hospital. Melissa sat as calmly as possible, holding his near leg while the medics cared for him. In the ER, she recognized one of the nurses as the handsome Indian she'd seen in the parking lot.

Vertical Challenge

When Captain Ericson woke up, he lay beneath a warm but rough-textured blanket. The pallet beneath him was also uneven. He wore a gown of some kind and so assumed that he was in some kind of hospital. The room was dimly-lit by irregular ceiling fixtures, and there were no windows.

He stood up, shakily at first, his eyes adjusting to the light. The room was rectangular, the floor and walls of what felt like thin wood. There was a bedside table with a bottle of -- yes, water -- Ericson realized after a cursory sip. He then felt the urge to pee and found nothing to use but a pail in the corner. Afterwards, Ericson felt around the room for a door, finding none. He stumbled against what felt like an armchair and sat down on it to think. It was firmly cushioned with a rough-textured upholstery, like burlap. Ultimately, he stood up on it to press at the ceiling, to see if it had tiles and an air duct through which he could crawl. But apparently he shoved the flimsy structure too hard because the whole thing moved! Just a few inches at first, letting in a hairline of light. He pushed harder and the ceiling tipped up more, allowing more light inside the little room.

Dumbfounded, Ericson peered out.

The view was at first perplexing, not the expected desert landscape but one of creeping familiarity. A large wooden expanse stretched out before him. Man-made structures stood about, some waist-high, others of his height or taller. He climbed out of the shelter and took a few steps forward, stopping at the sound of approaching, booming footsteps. They stopped of a sudden and Ericson heard, "Tom, for God's sake, get back in your box!"

When the incredulous astronaut would not return, Dr Mayer gently picked him up and deposited him quickly inside.

"There's some food and an explanation inside that sack," Mayer added, tossing a bag into the room and covering it more securely.

In the bag were pieces of cheese and meat in irregular chunks, a piece of dried fruit the size and flavor of a plum, a piece of dry bread, and the

note Mayer spoke of -- the giant-sized Mayer, that is.

"Tom, I don't know how to say this, but here it is: when your lifepod re-entered Earth's atmosphere it appeared intact, but when we opened the hatch after you failed to respond, you were found buried in the folds of your spacesuit. As you can see, you are one foot tall and it's not reversable. You have been asleep in an induced coma for two months and your family has been told that you are officially lost in space. I have had to fight for your security and have brought you out to my country home for the time being. I am preparing better quarters for you so you'll have to rough it another day or so.
Dr. Ivan Mayer"

Tom sat in the armchair, appetite checked. It was a lot to take in. He was alive at least but his folks! His dad was a retired Air Force pilot, his mom was frail with a heart condition. He had a younger sister and brother, Janet and Ted. A career-oriented bachelor, he only had one woman in his life. Would he ever see any one of them again?

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The quarters were ... amazing. No other word for it. Mayer had bought it off of a wealthy acquaintance, one of the supporters of the space program. It had been the property of his daughter, who wanted to have more than a pre-fab plastic house for her doll collection. The rich man had hired retired-by-CGI movie model makers to create it. There was a fully-wired and plumbed cottage which had four rooms -- bed, bath, living, and kitchen. A short hall led to a back porch and garden of real potted miniatures, including bonsai trees, flowers, and hybrid mini-tomatoes & onions. The kitchen had a working stove with real copper pots and pans, glassware, silverware, and porcelain. The refrigerator had been one of those desktop, single-can coolers you find in gadget catalogs. It had been stocked with containers of the smallest florets of broccoli and cauliflower, the tiniest carrots and potatoes, single-serve packages of cheese, and dried fruit. On the counter were tiny jars of instant tea and coffee -- a few crystals of which would make decent cupfuls for Tom. The bread was crackers or silver-dollar pancakes Mayer made himself. Single grains of rice and barley were eaten like

rolls. Seasoning was limited to salt and pepper, and little vials of cooking oil. The only meat that was available was dried and Tom felt he could live without it.

In addition to the house was a swimming pool. The living room library was stocked with real miniature books of all the classics. A smart-phone attached to one wall was packed with films and music Mayer knew Tom liked. It had been modified also as a phone to contact Mayer and a few technicians loyal to him. He was allowed access to a few websites for news and entertainment, but because of his situation, could not contact any family or friends. His bedroom closet and bureau were filled with tailored men's wear made for popular dolls and action figures, though underpants were limited to swimwear and there were no socks. Writing paper and pieces of graphite and crayon gave Tom outlets for creativity.

The cottage was set on a large table that had been carpeted in real sod, which was regularly moistened via an automatic sprinkler system. There was a walkway for jogging or strolling, and there was a forest of more bonsai trees with a set of outdoor furniture to relax upon. Sunlight came from a row of windows near the ceiling, as the structure had been set up in the basement for privacy. Although the room was scrupulously clean and free of vermin, a fine-meshed netting protected the property.

"Think of it as the space lab of the future, Tom," Mayer suggested. "Tomorrow's astronauts will be living in space stations with fewer luxuries than this."

"Yeah, I know, Doc," Tom shrugged. "My life was no longer my own once I signed up to this mission."

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One morning, Tom rose for a jog around the 'park'. To add a little more life to the place, Mayer had installed an aquarium of small fish inside a grotto-like extension of the property. Tom could step down into it's dimly-lit interior and watch the creatures go about their own man-made

confinement. Eventually, feeding them and maintaining the aquarium gave him something useful to do.

Once in awhile, Mayer would present Tom with actual country walks. He would ride in a repurposed baby harness, usually on Mayer's chest. Tom enjoyed the fresh air and the changing seasons. It was a good-sized property with a lot of trees and a high stone wall for privacy. The doctor had family wealth plus the income from the space program and a few books. He was a widower with one daughter who lived in Europe and rarely visited. The only regular visitors were mostly male government technicians. Rather chauvinistically, Mayer had decided not to allow women after an incident with one who became infatuated with the tiny astronaut. Although Tom welcomed the attention and delightful views of her cleavage, she was dismissed from the project. Tom wound up jogging a lot that week.

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One afternoon on a walk through the grounds, Mayer sat on a bench and gently stood Tom beside him upon it. He brought out a special home-made harness with a leash, which made Tom's jaw drop at first, but became intrigued by the little camera that was attached to it.

"I feel like a Chihuahua," Tom muttered, striding along the unpaved walkway as Mayer walked slowly behind him.

Eventually, Tom began to enjoy the challenge of the rough terrain. Bugs flew past him like exotic birds. He hopped over pebbles that appeared to be large rocks to him. Wildflowers towered like trees. Mayer chuckled and looked away as Tom undid his velcro fly and relieved himself against the stem of an oak seedling. This of course was edited out of the subsequent video taken by his harness camera.

A miniature ATV was presented to Tom on his first anniversary as a little person. He drove his electric jeep around the property. An accomplished artist, he brought a drawing pad -- a white postit notepad to normal folks -- and colored pencil nibs to record the kind of detail work most naturalist have to do with magnifying glasses. A radar

technician tracked his movements, including a monitor of the sky in case a curious or hungry raptor might swoop down and carry him off. There had been one attempt early on, which retreated with a well-aimed sonic blast that worked like water spray on fighting cats.

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Five years passed without major incident. The oversexed assistant blabbed to a tabloid about the 'mini-naut' holed up in the basement of a scientist's house but the feds quickly shut her up. Tom never even heard of it, as his news-feed was carefully filtered. He knew about natural disasters and the deaths of famous people; he mostly watched baseball games, movies, and nature shows.

Tom's saddest experience was the death of his mother. He asked to visit her grave and Ivan sneaked him out of the compound to do so, driving the 75 miles up to the Ericson's hometown and kneeling before her tombstone with Tom hidden in his harness to grieve. He left her a bouquet of baby's-breath, which looked like white roses in his hands.

A few months later, Tom began to write his memoirs. He hoped that some descendant would be able to read it. Despite his deep friendship with Ivan Mayer, loneliness was affecting his worldview greatly. He was angry about America's decline as a leader in science and technology, and that he had no say in elections because he was -- for all intents and purposes -- officially dead. Each of his siblings had since married and were raising families of their own.

Ivan gave Tom a thumb-drive the size of a book in Tom's hands to record his own videos of his world. He sat on his dollhouse sofa and talked about his life. In one telling clip, a woman appeared to be sitting next to him, but she never moved or looked at him. As it turned out, she was an anatomically-correct doll gifted to him by one of the technicians. At first, he had appreciated the gesture. She was perfectly-made, with soft silicone skin and realistic hair. He used her for his private pleasure but gradually found the situation too sordid. Shortly after the video was shot, he carried the doll out to the edge of the table and dumped her there; it was discreetly gone the next

morning.

For a few days after, Ivan seemed a little off his game, perhaps disturbed by the incident. One evening, there was a distinct knocking on his front door. At first he thought he was dreaming; when people wanted to talk to him, they called first, then occasionally tapped on his door with a dowel-stick.

Curious, Tom went to the door and opened it. At first he thought she was a new model of doll, albeit with a familiar face and figure.

"Hello, Tom, may I come in?"

He hadn't seen her half a dozen years and almost fainted, steadying himself on the door-jamb.

"Mei-Lin, is it really you?"

"Yes, Tom. Let me explain..."

Mei-Lin had lived on the space station with Tom and another male-female pair from Russia, Olav and Nicola, who were close friends but not a couple. The pursuit of science united the quartet, but there had been more than business between Tom and the Japanese woman. Although there had been stolen kisses and embraces while the others were asleep or elsewhere in the floating complex, the couple had never been intimate. The love affair blossomed in space after a few brief professional meetings months before on Earth. They had told him only that she had landed safely but of course, they could not communicate.

Mei sat beside Tom on the sofa. She had changed little -- only a few strands of gray marred her short black hair -- but she still had the calm, sweet face he remembered. Like him, she had an appreciation for art and literature. She nodded approvingly at his framed prints and rows of books.

"Ah! Conrad," she marveled, picking up the book Tom had been reading. "Even my own country, where technological advances are the

norm, can't seem to give me printed works like these..."

He kissed her impulsively and she returned it. They embraced and held one another close.

Later that evening, Mei stood at the stove making dinner for the two of them. She wore the pretty silk robe she had brought with her in an overnight bag now sitting on the coffee table. She glanced, smiling, at her lover as he dozed on the rumpled sheets of his bed. The experience had been quite wonderful, both doing without so long.

Tom pulled on his own robe and padded over to her, nuzzling her neck. He literally felt like a new man. Tomatoes and onions sizzled with hybrid spinach in the pan. She had already made a stack of savory pancakes to go with it.

"I miss rice," she said casually.

"But what of your country's techno advancements?" Tom joked, receiving her quick elbow jab with a laugh.

"In it's natural state, tasting each grain," she continued, "That mouth-feel food scientists talk about." She shrugged, sighing.

"Apples," Tom nodded, "Biting into a whole crispy apple, with the juice running down your chin. Dried chunks, even reconstituted with boiling water, just don't match it."

"I find that I don't miss meat, even sushi has become unpalatable."

"Fish bait has never been palatable to me... ow, stop that!" he laughed.

"I think that our bodies cannot digest the fibers, even when the meat is ground into a paste, which is, well, disgusting. The young vegetables, however, are tender and flavorful."

They ate on the back porch.

"Ah, this reminds me of home," she said, gazing at Tom's garden. He had long-since learned how to trim the bonsai with special clippers made by a surgical technician.

"My home is similar," she continued, "but in a smaller space. I haven't the forest and my aquarium is not as large."

"Our keepers appear to be like-minded," Tom said, stroking her hand. "Do you think, Mei-Lin, that we could ... marry?"

She blushed prettily but turned her face away. She wept softly for a moment.

"I'm sorry, Mei, honey --"

"We are caught between two worlds, Tom," she said finally.

In the morning she was gone.

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"I can't tell you more, Tom. It was a gift from the Japanese Embassy, her visit."

They were outside, Ivan sitting and Tom standing, each leaning back against the bench. Tom sighed.

"I shouldn't have asked her to marry me. I don't know what I was thinking -- post-intimacy optimism or something."

"She loves her country, Tom -- she's a national icon, a symbol of perseverance. i hear she has fan clubs of teenage girls --"

Tom faced him, incredulous.

"Are you saying they know about her, what happened to her??!"

"Yes, Tom,' Ivan sighed, "Someone talked. A technician fell in love

with her. Apparently he created a doll of himself for her, one that appeared to be fully aroused. Naturally, she was repulsed and spurned his advances, to the point of pushing the figurine off her property. The little weasel went to the press and outed her. It was a PR nightmare for all involved. However, it has become a good thing for Ms. Lin, in a way. The royalties on her life story alone have made her very comfortable."

"She told me her digs weren't as elaborate as mine."

"This is true, Tom. She gives most of her money to charity. In fact, that's why she was in the States, to speak to the UN."

"Holy..." Tom muttered.

"Her visit here was purely professional at first -- I had consulted on one of her previous flights, you may recall. She arrived with her press agent and her father, who is retired military, like your father."

Tom sighed; he missed his old dad and the long conversations about service and life in general.

"I -- I told her about you. You've been so, well, distracted lately. Unhappy."

Tom walked over and tugged on Ivan's polo shirt sleeve. it was early summer.

"Best time I've had in years, pal,"

"You're not angry?"

"No. Well, yes, but not in a bad way. I feel like a human being again. I was starting to think I was no better than Polly," he added, referring to his doll, currently stowed away in his bedroom closet. He wasn't so noble as to return her. "Will my story ever come out?" he asked, somewhat reluctantly.

"I can't say, honestly. Japan has such a different culture -- more forgiving of the government."

As he spoke, Tom noticed sunlight glinting off something in the sky, far off. Mayer's property was near the Air Force base where he worked, so aircraft sightings were normal. But this one appeared to be hovering..."

"Ivan -- isn't there restricted airspace around here?"

"Yes -- why?" Ivan looked in the direction Tom was looking. "Oh my god... perhaps we should go inside. Get into your harness, quick!"

Tom climbed up Ivan and got back into his carrier. Ivan stood up casually as possible and strode back to the house, and into the basement to let Tom off. Tom entered his house and waited for further word from Ivan. It came shortly.

"Tom, I'm afraid that there has been a security breach. The helicopter passengers were international press and we were able to detain them and confiscate their equipment. However, a few photos were sent to the online tabloid, Ogler. We have sent a cease-and-desist order, but I have to tell you now that ever since Mei Lin was exposed, the conspiracy idiots have been prattling on about you and the Russian couple."

"Olav and Nicola got married?" Tom said distractedly. "I thought he was gay."

"Russia has become intensely intolerant of sexual minorities in recent years. The disappearance was sold as a heroic couple lost in space along with their American comrade, but their true fate is unknown."

"God that is horrible. They were nice people. Very serious about their scientific work but the four of us got along very well. But what is this conspiracy talk about?"

"That you're alive somewhere and just bizarre speculation involving

alien abduction, NASA experimentation, that Fantastic Voyage was a real thing, and that the government has a plan to miniaturize all dissidents, silly stuff like that."

"Mmm, Raquel Welch, skintight white uniform..." Tom mused, still high on his recent lovemaking.

Ivan chuckled for a moment then said, "Be serious, Tom, this is a potentially dangerous situation."

"Do I have a say in this at all?"

"You do, to a point."

"Say the photos somehow reveal something --"

"Unlikely, what with the trees and the distance involved, I suspect. I will appear as a fuzzy image of a man sitting on a bench and relaxing in the sun."

A few days later, legal attempts to block exhausted, the photos did reveal exactly what Ivan predicted.

"I'm 'as indistinct as a shadow on the Grassy Knoll'," Ivan quoted the article in his accompanying email. Tom's access to the site was blocked. After Ivan had read the comments -- more idiotic speculation illustrated by stills from sci-fi films, and vulgar remarks about Ms. Lin -- he felt that the gossip would only upset Tom.

The actual case remained a mystery for the scientific community. Both Tom and Mei agreed that it was alien origin but to what purpose, only time would tell. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the recent memory of their lying side by side in bed, facing each other. Between caresses, their scientific minds turned to the source of their situation.

"I cannot fathom either of our governments having the technology to do this," she said, rolling on to her back.

"Agreed," Tom assented. "Alien interference is the only logical explanation -- but why? A warning, a prank -- ?"

"An exhibition, perhaps. 'This is what we can do.' "

"Wreck promising lives. Thank you, Mr. Extraterrestrial!"

"Not so wrecked," Mei said, smilingly urging Tom closer.

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Tom took a long walk around his grounds. He wound up in the grotto, watching his colorful pets. There had been times over the years when he had considered joining them, either to swim among them or to provide them with food as his dead body floated. He wept rarely and now he did again, tears of anger and frustration, not in self-pity but for his lady and for their Russian counterparts. How she kept her dignity through crass commercialism and crude remarks of the great unwashed public.

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At a desert listening station, a young man and his sister sat at a console, watching the stars. It was a typical Nevada summer, hot and dry, and the pair wore identical khakis and sleeveless shirts, their dark hair cut short. The girl had more of her father's coloring, her hair shot through with his brunet streaks. They were monitoring their parents, whose experiences of twenty-some years before had been an international sensation for a couple of cycles of journalistic interest. How their father bravely exposed himself to the world, how the government initially denied his existence and how their mother put her delicate foot down and brought them together. After all, she -was- a mother, carrying the young man now focusing on his parents as they tried to contact the aliens who had shrunk them. The young man and his sister were of normal size, themselves the objects of media frenzy as they grew up, gradually assuming their natural appearance during their adolescent growth spurt. Raised then by Dr. Mayer, they followed their

family into science, living with him until his untimely death.

Tom and Mei sat at a similar console in a self-contained unit attached to the international space station. Immaculately white, streamlined rooms were graced with bonsai shrubs, a nod to their recent past. They spoke to their children and Mei worried that they weren't eating enough; Tom and Michael talked about sports; Kristina spoke shyly about her boyfriend. A normal human family getting on with their lives.
